DISCERNMENT
Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Volume 6 | Issue 1 Article 1

Holistic University Spiritual Formation and Ecclesial Relationships

Sara G. Barton
Pepperdine University, sara.barton@pepperdine.edu

DISCERNMENT
Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Holistic University Spiritual Formation and Ecclesial Relationships

Sara G. Barton

***Abstract**: In an effort to learn more about student experiences of disembodied and disembedded spirituality, the researcher conducted a qualitative research project among undergraduate students who expressed a desire to grow spiritually. This research was conducted as part of the author's doctoral project. The participants were volunteers who had attended a university spiritual life retreat and wanted to continue growing in their faith over a six-week period, expressly committed to life embedded in community and through experiments in embodied spiritual practices. Using questionnaires, surveys, and interviews that included both fixed-choice questions and open-ended questions, the researcher gathered data that would help locate themes and discern future possibilities related to embodiment and community in the context of spiritual growth. Participants committed to explore and experiment with spirituality in community and share with the rest of the group in the context of weekly shared meals around the researcher's dining table.*

As the spiritual landscape of the twenty-first century continues to shift rapidly, the spiritual leaders, educators, and administrators of Christian colleges and universities scramble to adapt our work and mission in an ever-changing era. The lives and schedules of students, faculty, and staff members look different than they did ten years ago, let alone than they did when our universities were originally envisioned. We are rethinking every aspect of the student experience, inside and outside the classroom — and our students' spiritual formation is no different. Compared to their predecessors, our students today are less interested in traditional forms of church and more interested in justice and service. They are less interested in shared practices and more interested in individually tailored experiences. They are less interested in organized, communal religion and more interested in a private, self-defined spirituality.

In a wider context, religious persons, both Christian and non-Christian, in the contemporary Western world, generally view spirituality as something that occurs inside the self, to be experienced individually and

privately. When people say they are "spiritual but not religious," they generally mean that they do not attend a church or belong to a single institutional religious group. Instead, they mean that they internally and individually experience spirituality, "particularly when they are alone in some quiet and aesthetically beautiful place such as the mountains, listening to music, or reading spiritual books."[1] This internal and individual focus has resulted in the predominant modern view of spirituality in which "neither one's physical body, nor other persons, nor church communities"[2] are necessary for spiritual growth and formation.

The cultural shift toward individualism is well documented. Jean Twenge, for example, points out that American culture has grown more individualistic since 1965, and that young adulthood has different characteristics in individualistic cultures than in collectivistic cultures.[3] Overall, college students report higher levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness than at any other time in history, and there is growing research that points to these as symptoms of an increasingly individualistic culture.[4] While Twenge writes specifically about young people born after 1995, people of all generations who I encounter in my work display growing individualistic tendencies. In short, spirituality is disembodied, meaning it takes place inside individual persons. Spirituality is also dis-embedded, meaning it is largely individual and not directly relevant to other people. Spirituality, an inner reality, is thus only distantly related to human physical and social or communal nature.[5] At Christian universities, spiritual life leaders are grappling with how to engage community members influenced by individualism in communal efforts of spiritual formation, an effort that intersects intimately with the work of the church.

In an effort to learn more about student experiences of disembodied and dis-embedded spirituality, I conducted a qualitative research project among undergraduate students who expressed a desire to grow spiritually. This research was conducted as part of my doctoral project.[6] The participants were volunteers who had attended a university spiritual life

---

[1] Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of the Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3.

[2] Ibid., 4.

[3] Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood* (New York: Atria, Simon & Schuster, 2017), 42.

[4] Ibid., 102.

[5] Ibid., 4.

[6] Sara G. Barton, "Enhancing Spiritual Well-Being in University Students through Experiments in Embodied Spirituality," (DMin dissertation, Lipscomb University, 2016).

retreat and wanted to continue growing in their faith over a six-week period, expressly committed to life embedded in community and through experiments in embodied spiritual practices. Using questionnaires, surveys, and interviews that included both fixed-choice and open-ended questions, I gathered data to help locate themes and discern future possibilities related to embodiment and community in the context of spiritual growth. Participants committed to explore and experiment with spirituality in community and share with the rest of the group in the context of weekly shared meals around my dining table.

Students learned through affective and tactile methods of poetry, meals, and communal sharing that spirituality manifests itself through bodies, that the body and soul are inextricably fused together and should not be in conflict, and that communal spiritual experience is essential for individual spiritual growth. I used the following list of indicators to identify the implementation of embodied processes:

- Mindfulness, present awareness of body, soul, behavior, and environment
- Social or communal engagement and/or individual and interior elements of spirituality
- Integration of spiritual experience and expression into daily life
- Accepting and processing emotions in relation to spirituality
- Definition of success, failure, and challenge, and the important role these have in constructing a measurement of effectiveness

In this paper, I do not have space to share all themes and questions that emerged, but I share a few observations and surprises about our experiences with individualism, interiorism, and community.

Individual authenticity was one of the core themes that appeared in various forms throughout the surveys and weekly questionnaires. Students indicated that the effectiveness of the spiritual practices was measured by authenticity, and it is a significant indicator of adherence and consistency. The need to be personally genuine can even be seen in students' redefinition of concepts. For example, students reported that "true relaxation with God brings about personal connection even without words," and "truly memorizing scripture means embracing it in my heart, writing it, saying it out loud, and meditating on it" and "loving people comes from a pure heart, so you have to start in your heart with God." Coding of the authenticity theme reveals that participants make a clear distinction

between a concept and the ideal, which is the true, authentic, and inward form that they wish to attain when they seek spirituality.

In relation to authenticity, I looked at the students' use of the pronouns "I," "we," and "us" in their descriptions of the weekly spiritual experiments to see if they indicated whether a connection with other participants increased the perceived effectiveness of new spiritual practices. While some of the practices, like breath prayer, Sabbath rest, and prayer beads, could be seen as individual spiritual practices, students used a few interesting descriptions of communal experience in relation to authenticity and community:

- At first I did not want to try Sabbath, but when I saw how pumped [another participant] was, it got me interested and I tried it.
- When we did breath prayer, I had a hard time remembering but I remembered when I saw [another participant in the group] in the café.
- Learning about saints helped me get into it because [another student] was so passionate about Saint Ignatius that it made me passionate, too. If everyone heard him, they would carry or wear their saints differently.
- Some people noticed that me and [another participant] were carrying prayer beads and asked us why, so it was cool how God used us for witnessing, and that's why I am trying to be spiritual anyway.
- Even though I didn't have time to do Sabbath this week, hearing [another participant] talk about hammocking for two hours made me want to experience that with Jesus, too.

It appears that spiritual experimentation in community encouraged some students to find practices to be authentic when they heard their peers describe what they experienced. There are indications that if one person was willing to try something, that person's authenticity helped other people in the group experiment themselves. It also appears that one reason students want to be authentic inwardly is so that they will be authentic outwardly. There are also indications in thematic coding that if a student was in conflict with another person or people, they shamed themselves as spiritual failures because they were being inauthentic. For example, "I practiced breath prayer a lot, but I still had problems with [another person] so maybe I need to practice more with it to really change."

My biggest surprise in the findings was the measure of individual success or failure that students applied in the context of spiritual experimentation. Students did not easily locate successes in their spiritual experiences, but they readily located failures. Coding revealed that shame and failure were persistent themes in individual spiritual experiences, while joy and belonging were persistent themes in communal spiritual experiences.

Most students were not able to detach their concept of pass/fail from spiritual experience during the exploration of new exercises. Students faced a significant hurdle in measuring success when they explored new spiritual practices. While I experimented with the practices myself and attempted to model the notion that not every practice will be helpful for every person, students still largely described their experiences with new practices in terms of failure. For example, one student reflected, "I totally failed with prayer beads. I forgot to carry them every day except one." Instead of seeing the day she carried the beads as an opportunity to pray or grow, she described the entire practice in terms of failure. This theme of a failure-success dichotomy was prevalent throughout surveys and questionnaires in regard to all the practices. It appears that students measure effectiveness of spiritual practices in terms of daily personal commitments, with morning commitments being prevalent. For example, "I got up early and meditated on Philippians 2 two days this week and I got a lot out of it, but then I just slept the other days instead of valuing my own spiritual growth."

The students' reports of their spiritual experiences during the spiritual retreat versus their daily lives indicate that participants felt more comfortable describing themselves as successful when they were intentionally seeking spiritual growth through a time of communal retreat. On the other hand, when they were intentionally seeking spiritual growth during their normal daily lives, they used more language of failure. This would suggest that they tend to use the same measure of spirituality in normal life than they use on retreat, which needs correction and pastoral guidance.

One open-ended question in the questionnaire, given both before and after the group experiments, asked students to identify experiences that most challenge them to grow as a whole person (intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, physically, etc.). The practices most often labeled as "challenging" were the following: *prayer – alone* and *Bible study – alone*. The practices that proved the least challenging to implement were communal practices, for example: *intentional spiritual meals – together* and *memorization of scripture – together*.

To put some of this project with students in historical context, I refer to theologian Owen Thomas, who believes that too much emphasis and focus has been placed on the inner life as distinct from the outer bodily and communal life. He points out that it is a great paradox of Christian history that, "On the one hand, the biblical tradition seems to emphasize the primacy of the outer—the bodily, speech, and action—while, on the other hand, the Christian tradition under the influence of . . . Augustine and Dionysius, among others, tends to emphasize the inner."[7]

Researchers and practitioners Brown and Strawn explain that when too much emphasis is placed on the interior life, the goal of the moral life is perfection of the soul, so virtue becomes a means to an end—an end heavily tainted with inwardness and individualism. This dualism prioritizes individuality and inwardness so that individuals become concerned with their own personal salvation and personal relationship with Jesus at the expense of behavior toward other persons and God's creation.[8] As long as interior-oriented Christians are individually right with God in their personal souls, they may then behave outwardly in ways that do not seem to align with the ideals of their spirituality. It appears that the students in my project when faced with this dichotomy, feel like inauthentic spiritual failures.

Wendell Berry explores body-soul dualism and how that affects the lives of Christians as persons within communities. Berry describes the results of this bifurcation: "Contempt for the body is invariably manifested in contempt for other bodies—the bodies of slaves, laborers, women, animals, plants, the earth itself."[9] He explores this idea in more detail:

For many of the churchly, the life of the spirit is reduced to a dull preoccupation with getting to Heaven. At best the world is no more than an embarrassment and a trial to the spirit which is otherwise radically separated from it. The true lover of God must not be burdened with any care or aspect for His Works. While the body goes about its business of destroying the earth, the soul is supposed to wait for Sunday, keeping itself free of earthly contaminants. While the body exploits other bodies, the soul stands aloof, free from sin, crying to the gawking bystanders: 'I am not enjoying it!' As far as this sort of 'religion' is concerned, the body is no more than a lusterless container of the soul, a mere 'package' that will

[7] Owen C. Thomas, "Interiority and Christian Spirituality," *Journal of Religion* 80 1 (2000): 51.

[8] Brown and Strawn, *The Physical Nature of the Christian Life*, 24.

[9] Wendell Berry, "The Body and the Earth," in *Wendell Berry, Recollected Essays* (San Francisco: Northpoint Press, 1981), 284.

nevertheless light up in eternity, forever cool and shiny as a neon cross. The separation of the soul from the body and from the world is no disease of the fringe, no aberration, but a fracture that runs through the mentality of institutionalized religion like a geologic fault. … And yet what is the burden of the Bible if not a sense of the mutuality of influence, rising out of an essential unity, among soul and body and community and the world.[10]

The inwardness and individualism described by Berry and others is not new. It is a resurrected version of the ideology of the Gnostics of the first few centuries who believed that the Christian faith is a matter of special spiritual knowledge, acquired by individual persons through inner experiences, excluding anything material, physical, or embodied. They believed that the "Christian life is to be lived in the spiritual realm, disconnected from everyday bodily life and community interactions."[11] The students in my project revealed that they desire a separation from dualist Christians who do not show justice and equality connected to their spiritual lives. For example, one student wrote, "More Christian people need to spend their time doing spiritual practices instead of all their time judging. Who cares if you drink or swear or you are gay as long as you love Jesus and people. That matters more than anything and spirituality should be how people learn." Another student wrote, "More people should carry or wear Saint Francis reminders because he knew about creation and the environment even without science like we have. Listening to science doesn't convince some people to change, but spirituality can change people."

Of course, we must ask how Christian universities may contribute to spiritual formation in partnership with the work of the church. Philosopher James K. A. Smith provides a helpful guide for Christian university communities grappling with spiritual formation goals in regard to the balance of individualism, interiority, and community. In *Desiring the Kingdom* and *Imagining the Kingdom,* Smith argues that the Christian university, as an extension of the Western church, has overemphasized intellectual aspects of spiritual formation and implied that sanctification is primarily something taught and gained through correct knowledge. He asks,

Could it be the case that learning a Christian perspective doesn't actually touch my desire, and that while I might be able to think about the world from a Christian perspective, at the end of the day I love not the

[10] Ibid., 283-84.

[11] Brown and Strawn, *The Physical Nature of the Christian Life*, 26.

kingdom of God but rather the kingdom of the market? By reducing the genius of Christian faith to something like an intellectual framework—a 'perspective' or a 'worldview'—we can (perhaps unwittingly) unhook Christianity from the practices that constitute Christian discipleship. And when that happens, we end up thinking that being a Christian doesn't radically reconfigure our desires and our wants, our practices and our habits.[12]

To engage holistic spiritual formation, Smith maintains that education must begin with correct anthropology, particularly how human beings act, know, and learn. He encourages Christian educators to resist the internal/external dichotomy by operating in tune with habits and imagination. Holistic spiritual formation, he says, does not inform the intellect alone, but must also form our habits, our loves, and our longings. Reasserting the role of the body in relation to spirituality, Smith believes that formation happens, not by dissemination of information, but by recruitment of convictions in a visceral, tangible, bodily way.[13] For example, he points out that since the Protestant Reformation, the sermon has been overemphasized in Protestantism, because that is how we think formation happens.[14] Historically, this emphasis on cognition was a response to superstitious ways of thinking about spiritual life that arose in the Middle Ages, for which there needed to be correction. But unfortunately, the byproduct of that overemphasis on ideas, beliefs, doctrines, and propositional truth is that we practice Christian spiritual formation as if the brain is the entirety of what orients us as human beings.

While Smith stresses the importance of embodied, even ritualistic practices of Christian worship as formative at a fundamental, precognitive, affective level, he is not suggesting that Christians "kiss our brains goodbye" in worship.[15] However, his attention to the non-cognitive aspects of spiritual formation is especially intriguing in the university context, where we major in cognition by default. Smith challenges us to consider that in recent history, Christian educational institutions, particularly Protestant institutions, have illustrated a bifurcated understanding of the human person owing more to modernity and the Enlightenment than to the holistic, biblical vision of human beings. He writes:

---

[12] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Cultural Liturgies, Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 219.

[13] Ibid., 39.

[14] Ibid., 136.

[15] Ibid., 191.

In particular, Christian education has absorbed a philosophical anthropology that sees human persons as primarily thinking things. The result has been an understanding of education largely in terms of *in*formation; more specifically, the end of Christian education has been seen to be the dissemination and communication of Christian ideas rather than the formation of a particular people. This can be seen more acutely, I think in how visions of Christian education have been articulated in terms of "a Christian worldview."[16]

Of course, the idea of who we are as thinking things is of particular interest in academic settings, and the significance of the soul is particularly relevant in Christian education settings. But amid dualistic treatments of the mind and soul, the notion of the Christian life as a narrative to be holistically embodied has long been marginalized. Ancient Christian institutions had a more embodied and holistic view of spiritual formation. However, Christian education today, as a product of modernity, has thoroughly absorbed the dualistic, disembodied, Enlightenment-influenced view of the human person. Smith exemplifies this point with discussion of Christian colleges and universities and the prominence of vocabulary such as "the integration of faith and learning" and "Christian worldview," where it is claimed that students at Christian colleges will learn what everyone else learns but "from a Christian perspective." Smith maintains that this vocabulary is identified primarily as a set of doctrines or a system of belief, is dualistic, and results in the reduction of Christian faith primarily to a set of ideas to be believed if one thinks correctly.[17]

Smith's point is that the thinking self is only one part of who we are. Concerning spiritual formation at Christian universities, he suggests that being a disciple of Jesus will not be accomplished merely by getting the right ideas, doctrines, and beliefs in students' heads in order to guarantee proper behavior. Instead, being a disciple of Jesus is about "being the kind of person who loves rightly—who loves God and neighbor and is oriented to the world by the primacy of that love."[18] His thesis is that we become such people through immersion in the material, embodied practices of Christian worship, through affective experience, over time.

Christian universities, therefore, must move away from identifying themselves "as sites for transmitting Christian ideas, to 'ecclesial colleges,' understood to be institutions intimately linked to the church and thus an

[16] Ibid., 31.

[17] Ibid., 31-32.

[18] Ibid., 33.

extension of its practices."[19] Smith discusses this extension of church practices in terms of liturgy, narrative, and habit.

Liturgy

Smith discusses liturgy in terms of formative, social practices that touch our most fundamental longings and desires (which students described when they highlighted their need for authenticity). In compelling readers to imagine liturgy beyond negative perceptions of mere ritual, he points out that cultural practices function liturgically in our lives all the time without us realizing it. His principal example is the shopping mall, and he explains that when people are consumerists, it is not because they go to the mall and someone hands out a tract to teach what the mall believes. The mall experience is not an intellectual exchange but a tactile, visceral, embodied experience that over time recruits hearts that long for the consumerist vision of a flourishing life. Smith suggests that the church and Christian institutions have over-emphasized the head and have not engaged the very practices that institutions use all the time to effectively engage people. People are not compelled primarily through belief and thought. They are compelled by imagination and emotion. Christian imagination, love, shalom, and flourishing should be about capturing imagination regarding what we fundamentally love and desire as human beings. Instead, in overemphasizing cognition and the mind, we fail to engage people holistically. Smith's point is that marketers and manufacturers understand something fundamental about humans that the church and the ecclesial university must grasp in order to engage people holistically through body and emotion.[20]

While modern Christianity has mistakenly treated spiritual formation as an intellectual enterprise, Smith emphasizes that Christianity needs liturgy: worship experiences, spaces, and practices that recruit bodies and affections alongside the mind. Worship was historically much more visual, tactile, and experiential than in recent Western Christianity, and there is a need to recover liturgy. Recovering liturgy inevitably involves embodied spirituality. We can see this in Scripture, where Jesus modeled embodied spirituality in baptism, feast, touching, healing, posture in prayer, and feeding people. While propositional communication was important to Jesus, his communication was embedded in parables that function narratively, not merely in data transmission and information.

[19] Ibid., 34.

[20] Ibid., 23-25, 93-95, 122-26.

Human beings are sympathetic to story, narrative, poetry, and symbols, and this, says Smith, is how imagination is fired and desire is recruited. In explaining this firing of imagination, Smith relies on two key theorists and philosophers of embodied intentionality, Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, who focus on communal habits and rituals.[21] Learning, Smith emphasizes, is about participation in practices, not simply about cognition and propositional concepts, and he explores the anthropological inner logic of churches' and educational institutions' mistaken understanding of spiritual formation.[22] Smith wants us to see that God is not ultimately trying to create a community of spectators who merely think and comment on the world. Instead, God renews people who will in turn be restorers and doers for the kingdom. Unfortunately, Christian institutions tend to resource doers as if they are thinkers. Alternatively, the focus should be on the nature of action and what generates action at the embodied level of the human being.[23]

Narrative

Action at the embodied level connects to narrative. When human beings act, Smith insists, we live into the narratives we have absorbed, becoming characters in the drama that has captured our imagination, not as an outcome of rational deliberation but out of a script that is in our very skin and bones.[24] The intellectualist model of education assumes that if we want people to act differently, we should engage them in a rational, internal, deliberative thought process, as if we are what we think. The problem with that approach, however, is that it does not generate action. What people actually tend to do is from the gut, not the mind; there are things we value without realizing or thinking through them.[25] Because we are embodied, incarnate creatures, defined by what we love, aimed and oriented by what we desire, ignited in imagination through stories, we are ultimately creatures whom God captures through narrative, experienced primarily in liturgy, from which we have been disconnected. Smith thus argues that until Christian education revalues the imagination, our imaginations are going to be captivated by stories that rival the kingdom of God.[26]

---

[21] James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 41-72.

[22] Ibid., 75-100.

[23] Ibid., 8, 12.

[24] Ibid., 14-15.

[25] Ibid., 10, 53.

[26] Ibid., 140-41.

Especially pertinent to the university context is Smith's conversation about how our focus on novelty devalues opportunities to engage students narratively through liturgy. We tend to assume that young people need constant reinvention and innovation, so there has been a tendency, especially within Evangelicalism, to find the next cool way to do church, as if this is how we attract young people. But Smith cautions that we will not remake or recreate the world with God if we are constantly reinventing the church. He insists that in our obsession with innovating and reinventing the church to be relevant, we invent ourselves right out of the story of what God is actually doing in the world.[27] We lose the power of narrative to engage students.

We need tradition for innovation, he insists, and the way we resource innovators of mission in the world is by helping them remember and recover the true story of the world. This, he believes, is a holistic, embodied process of immersion in the historical practices of the Christian church. Thus, we are formed by the true story, for example, in baptism, when individuals are not merely baptized into a personal relationship with Jesus, but through baptism's story that performs its very practice, communities make promises to support the one who is baptized into the faith. When we take part in the Eucharist, we are at a table where everyone gets bread, and so we envision a story where no one is hungry. In these ways, in ancient, historical, liturgical, embodied Christian worship, God's people become a people who imagine the world differently and thus desire a coming future kingdom. Christian formation through liturgy and narrative, therefore, is not about constant reinvention, but rather, it is about making innovators through immersion in an ancient story and its practices. Re-narration of our identity in Christ is experienced because something spiritual happens bodily that cultivates the spirit.[28]

Habit

Habit, argues Smith, is essential to Christian formation. When we are immersed in practices, environments, and repetition, even if we do not understand everything, the Spirit can transform how we act. Many Christians affirm repetition in other aspects of their lives, such as athletics or playing musical instruments, but we too often think it is illegitimate to affirm repetition in our spiritual lives.[29] This is a modern, Enlightenment-

[27] Ibid, 150.

[28] Ibid., chap. 4.

[29] Ibid., 180-82.

influenced idea that requires correction. At a university where students live, worship, eat, and learn together, opportunities exist to address bifurcation. Students can try new practices in a learning environment, and then they will have resources for their spiritual lives moving forward.[30]

In addition to Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, Smith's approach is heavily influenced by the philosophy of Charles Taylor, especially his ideas about Western notions of the human self. Taylor posits that the partitioning of the world into inner-outer spheres of the self is uniquely Western and not universal. In fact they are without precedent in other cultures and times.[31] Nevertheless, he insists, inner-outer schemes are so deeply embedded in the Western psyche, and now so connected to the modern sense of agency, that they are almost irresistible and have "been woven into a spiritual doctrine which is historically quite strange and unfamiliar."[32] Taylor traces this especially to Augustine's Platonic influence: "It is hardly an exaggeration to say that it was Augustine who introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition of thought. The step was a fateful one, because we have certainly made a big thing of the first-person standpoint."[33] Taylor further promotes holistic understandings of the self and the role of embodied practices while critiquing the dualistic and disembodied philosophies of Descartes and Locke.[34] Taylor's critique of Augustine-Cartesian-Lockean inward/outward distinctions is itself influenced by the work of Wittgenstein, who argued that the outward aspects of life such as the bodily actions and communal practices are key to the inner life of human beings.[35]

Ultimately, Taylor's goal in books like *Sources of the Self* is to retrieve a holistic understanding of selfhood in contrast to the bifurcated self of Western modernity, and this greatly influences Smith's proposals and should be explored in our conversations about holistic spiritual formation. It is important to realize that bifurcation of the human person affects everything related to spiritual formation and spiritual practices, including

---

[30] James K. A. Smith, "Re-Narrating Christian Scholarship in Postmodernity," pp. 19-44 in *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning*, eds. David I. Smith and James K. A. Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 43.

[31] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 114.

[32] Ibid., 113.

[33] Ibid., 131. Not all agree with this assessment. Denys Turner, for example, argues that interiority is precultural and natural, a fact of human cognition. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 90-91.

[34] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 177.

[35] Ibid., 35-39.

prayer, contemplation, study, worship, fasting, service, charity, solitude, silence, submission, chastity, confession, the sacraments of the church, human sexuality, and hermeneutics. Smith's emphasis on imagining the kingdom serves as a profound attempt to make Taylor's observations practical.

As we start to explore the practical details of what it might mean to move "beyond integration," John Wright emphasizes that as universities invite students into spiritual formation, not only is it important to explore interdisciplinary opportunities, it is also important for Student Affairs and academic departments to be in step with one another.[36] Spiritual formation has often been outsourced to the co-curricular side of campus, reiterating the message that heart, mind, and soul are separate from one another. Because of these disconnects between worship and classrooms, between Student Affairs and faculty, at some Christian universities there is tension or even animosity between campus worship, seen as "uncritical" and what faculty understand as the rigorous life of the mind in relation to the mission of the university lived out in their classrooms.[37] Smith writes,

They [faculty] may find that some students who are heavily involved in campus worship express a piety that doesn't seem as interested in understanding the rigors of econometrics or Latin declensions. On the other hand, those involved with campus worship tend to see scholars and students who are devoted to the work of scholarship and the advancement of knowledge but are neglecting the life of worship, and they may even have little use for church. Their Christianity, if it finds any expression, seems to be expressed in theoretical constructs or progressive politics. From both sides, there is probably a legitimate concern and biased misunderstanding. At its worst, the one side can't figure out why we have a chapel on campus, while the other side might sometimes find it hard to answer the question, "Why go to class?[38]

Smith asserts that this disconnect stems from the fact that both sides in this situation fail to appreciate the importance of liturgy and the role of practices in formation. One side equates Christianity with a belief system while the other side leans toward an emotive experience. Smith presents a holistic vision of Christian education, characterized by chapel specifically

---

[36] John W. Wright, "The Study of the Christian Scriptures and the Formation of the Faithful Habitus for Truthful Learning," pp. 165-186 in *Beyond Integration: Inter/Disciplinary Possibilities for the Future of Christian Higher Education*, eds. Todd C. Ream, Jerry Pattengale, and David L. Riggs (Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 165-67.

[37] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 224.

[38] Ibid.

as a space in which the ecclesial nature of the university comes together to "practice [for] the kingdom by engaging in the liturgical practices that form the imagination. … Worship, in other words, is the crucial incubator for hatching Christian accounts of the world."[39] The main point is that we want to avoid compartmentalization, or bifurcation, so that piety fostered in extracurricular does not undercut the academic project. Everything the university does must be framed toward loving God, with learning as an opportunity to love God.

While Smith discusses the church and the Christian university, he makes it clear that they are not the same thing. He is not trying to make the university a church, but he believes universities and seminaries should be embedded institutions in the life of the church so that the ethos of Christian education can be formative, not simply informative.[40] Craig Dykstra illustrates it like this, "Engagement in the church's practices puts us in a position where we may recognize and participate in the work of God's grace in the world. And it is these practices that "become arenas in which something is done to us, in us, and through us that we could not of ourselves do, that is beyond what we do."[41] Trusting the mysterious work of the Spirit, the university, therefore, has an opportunity through the curriculum and co-curriculum, and with the resource of church practices, to nurture experiences in which the Spirit may be a source of power and meaning, informing moral and spiritual development at a specific time in student lives.[42] Students can be exposed to various spiritual practices over time and in a community that nurtures the Christian social imaginary, shaping them for long-term discipleship through visceral, bodily experience that confirms, rather than competes, with intellectual virtues.[43]

In light of the discussion above and future considerations regarding the relationship between the Christian university and the church, I submit the following recommendations.

---

[39] Ibid.

[40] Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 10-14.

[41] Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, 2nd ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 41, 56.

[42] Smith, *Re-Narrating Christian Scholarship in Postmodernity*, 161.

[43] Smith draws here on Taylor's central notion of "social imaginary." With more adaptive nuance than the common term "worldview," social imaginaries emphasize, in Taylor's words, "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings." See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 171-176.

Recommendations

First, Christian universities should seek balance in relation to personal choice options in required spiritual formation and worship programs. I am especially concerned that the growing emphasis on choice in required chapel offerings (small groups, individual mentoring, affinity chapels, etc.) provides a perceived helpful dynamic in relation to non-Christian students or Christian students who do not want to be compelled to participate in spiritual life programs. Unintended consequences, however, accompany a breadth of programming choices. A university spiritual life culture can emphasize personal choice, programs, and events to the detriment of relationships and community, giving the message that spirituality is primarily an individual, cherry-picking endeavor. Christian formation and practice should center not on individual and personal preference, but on communities, service, and participation in the reconciliatory work of the kingdom of God. Traditional internal spiritual practices, like prayer, meditation, contemplation, and silence, should be taught and practiced, but they should be balanced with communal and embodied practices learned through habit and liturgy. Affinity spiritual growth groups may be explored only when balanced with a communal understanding of spirituality and in the context of the life of the church as the ultimate impetus of spiritual growth.

Therefore, Christian universities must revisit the trend toward a proliferation of options for students to fulfill chapel requirements. We must ask if efforts to appease individual student desires are robbing them of communal spiritual formation and instilling in them a habit that interior and individualistic spirituality is the ideal means of formation. It seems unsurprising that when students experience this approach to formation, they will expect to encounter that same approach to formation in life beyond college. Furthermore, while some have resisted discontinuing required chapel under the impression that it inevitably leads to secularization, several universities counter this claim. Calvin College, for example, where Smith serves, does not have a requirement. Perhaps invitations to communal worship and chapel would better prepare students for choosing the church after college, instead of placating them with a variety of false individualistic choices during college.

Second, spiritual formation goals at Christian colleges and universities should emphasize communal *telos* (the end of a goal-oriented process), and Jesus' Greatest Command provides a guide for just that. The Enlightenment emphasized the autonomy of individuals to determine their own ends, thus rejecting any specific *telos* as an imposition on libertarian

freedom, but this resulted in an underestimation of the significance of moral formation. A moral education is not simply about getting the right information; rather, it is about the inscription of good habits as the construction of character, and this is social, communal, and inherited. A formative education happens only through practices which inscribe a *habitus*—an orientation and inclination toward the world, aimed at a specific *telos*. Any vision for spiritual formation, therefore, should include an end goal that is clear and habits that the community shares in common with the church. In order to participate in the tradition called Christianity, one must necessarily participate in certain practices, and we do not do Christian practices as individuals. Practices in community are formative.[44] Student Affairs professionals, faculty, administration, and students likely have different views on what practices are formative, so I suggest a task force that includes all constituents of the university to review spiritual formation or Christian mission statements and determine if they are working toward the same goals and using the same language.

Third, when pursuing spiritual formation goals, universities must seek holistic solutions in keeping with the example of Jesus. While contemporary Christianity focuses largely on the mind for spiritual formation, Jesus models a tactile, embodied spirituality that functions narratively to achieve holistic transformation, and not just information transmission. God is interested in creating a community of doers for the kingdom, not inwardly focused spectators of the world. If we could further engage spiritual imagination for doers as restorers, renewers, and practitioners, we would nurture fertile ground for a spirituality that actively engages Christian practices such as hospitality, service, philanthropy, worship, and prayer as an embodied way of life. I suggest that the same task force described in my second recommendation above, should invest in assessment of how the university is describing volunteerism, service, mission, giving, and more in relation to communal spiritual practices and pedagogical practices.

Conclusion

Contextually, theologically, philosophically, anthropologically, Christian universities need a de-emphasis on spiritual life understood primarily between the inner world of the individual and the person of Jesus, apart from community. More emphasis should be given to understanding a spirituality that includes all unique dimensions of humanity, such as

[44] Ibid., 7-17.

rational thought, remembrance, creative abilities, moral and ethical capacities, intellectual capabilities, sexuality, bodily senses, emotion, and community as incarnational elements. We have an opportunity to provide correctives to the cultural story of individual success and upward mobility that so captivates the American imagination and instead engage vocation in terms of communal economy, understood in Christianity as the kingdom of God where loving the Lord with heart, soul, mind, and strength as individuals is intertwined with the communal call to love neighbors as ourselves. With our communal *telos* centered in the Greatest Command, we will be better spiritually oriented to our world as an ecclesial university that understands spiritual formation, rooted in communal Christian practice.

As the University Chaplain of Pepperdine University, Sara G. Barton provides pastoral care in the community and leads the staff of the Office of the Chaplain, who together seek to cultivate a spiritually formative environment for the Pepperdine community.

Sara holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Hazelip School of Theology and a Masters degree in Spiritual Formation from Spring Arbor University. Dr. Barton authored ***A Woman Called****, a memoir about her call to ministry, and she is a regular contributor to the Huffington Post Religion blog. Sara also teaches adjunct courses in New Testament for Pepperdine and in ministry for Lipscomb University. Sara and her husband John have two children, Brynn and Nate, and one daughter-in-law, Falon.*